Special Section: Converging Soul Substances in South East Asia

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Introduction

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There are many and various kinds of souls and spirits, ancestors and locality-specific numinous beings that constitute personhood in South East Asia.[1] Anthropologists and historians of the body have long noted the regional prevalence of these 'impersonal' life forces, which are notoriously elusive and prone to dissipation.[2] They have associated concept-events such as *qi* 氣 (energy, substance-force), *juus* (life force), *kahyek* (cool, spiritual liquid) and *lennawa* (life force) with winds and the breath of life,[3] and they have emphasized their directionality and movement, their being in constant flow like fluids, and hence have approximated them as 'life *forces*'.

This Special Section highlights, in addition, their likeness to ever-elusive vapours, and to the atmospheric (in both a meteorological and emotional sense). In contrast to 'life', which nowadays tends to be understood in terms of the life span of a fit individual, 'souls' extend into the past and future, into the beyond, the unborn and the afterlife[4] Furthermore, they refer towards the affective and emotional dimensions of being. Like *mana*, they often are only indirectly perceived through their effects on the perceptual world, being recognised primarily through their efficaciousness. This does not make them immaterial. Rather, they are 'soul *substances*'. They can cause transformation, they can themselves be transformed, they can trigger transformation and as

1 This Special Section comprises select papers presented in the panel "Notions of personhood and health in transition, and the containment of life", at the conference "Southeast Asia in Transition", University of Oxford, on 22 March 2014.

2 Kuriyama 1995.

3 e. g., Hsu/Low 2007.

4 The word 'soul' is not that of a Christian individual, but part of an undifferentiated 'soul pool' or of a 'dividual' (Strathern 1988: 13) as encountered in Oceanic socialities marked by cognatic or bilateral kinship.

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triggers can be implicated into the transformative process itself. There is an enormous efficaciousness and transformative power intrinsic to these 'soul substances'.[5]

'Animism' has been described all over the world, from Siberia to the Amazonia,[6] and this *Special Section* might be seen as contributing to recent research on 'new animism'.[7] However, in contrast to comparing Inner Asia with Amazonia, hunter-gatherers with pastoralists, and economics with cosmology, our aim is to focus on the efficaciousness of soul substances that prevail in one geo-cultural region: East and Southeast Asia. Our aim is to explain their efficaciousness from the perspective of a phenomenology of the body that pays attention to minute changes in sense perception as observed during ethnographic fieldwork. The focus is on daily-enacted skills and techniques that often are not verbalised.

In our Special Section we aim to foreground the practical ways in which 'beliefs' about 'meta-physical' or 'supra-natural' forces affect everyday life. We do so by suggesting, first, that the so-called meta-physical and supra-natural is dealt with in a very down-to-earth way, namely in the way in which one engages with the 'physical' and 'natural'. Hence we will be speaking of 'substances' (rather than concepts). We will draw on recent developments in the study of material culture[8] and the new materialities,[9] which emphasize that tangible things and impersonal matter become what they are perceived to be through how people relate to them.

Put more radically, this research is not limiting its gaze to objects, and how they are experienced and handled in culturally specific ways, and hence change in values attributed to them. Rather, it works with the anthropological insight that culture makes matter.[10] Matter is for people what they perceive-and-make it do – to, for, in and with them. We underline, with Maurice Merleau-Ponty and James Gibson,[11] that perception and locomotion, i.e., perceiving-and-making, are entwined within a single process of the cultural becoming of any human being, who cannot exist without relating to other-than-human beings, things, materials or matter.

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5 e. g., Holbraad 2007 on *ifa*.

6 e. g., Descola 2013 [2005].

7 Århem/Sprenger 2016.

8 e. g., Henare et al. 2007.

9 For East and Southeast Asia, see for instance Novellino 2009; Xiao 2016.

10 Hallowell (1960).

11 Merleau-Ponty 1962 [1945]; Gibson 1979; convincingly introduced to anthropology by Ingold 2000.

This material aspect of culture is currently researched by investigating how things and materials affect people, and which practices and procedures people use to channel and transform, or at least minimally affect and contain, these things and materials. To this literature we add an additional dimension, as we discuss soul substances that must be kept in constant flow. They are furthermore not only ever elusive and amorphous, but also metamorphous. They fluctuate in form and in the ways in which they are shared within heterogeneous and situationally renewed-and-reconstituted socialities. Our task to make ourselves understood vis-à-vis our readership has been the more daunting as their materiality is contested, as is that of most '*mana*-concepts'.

In daily life, however, the people we worked with treated souls and spirits much like substances or things that can be dealt with in a very matter of fact way. We will attend to the materials and their sensory effects on the person who handles them. We will focus on people's skilled practice, body techniques and sensory appreciation in seemingly insignificant activities that can take on a quality of ritual. We find interesting, for instance, that among the Ifugao on the Philippines a chickweed (*Drymaria cordata*) put around one's ear in the morning is meant to stop the soul of the deceased continuing to whisper into it throughout the day,[12] much as we might put ear plugs in at night to stop ourselves being disturbed by the noise of traffic outside.

There is of course more to the above action of keeping the dead at a distance, and of acknowledging that the soul of a loved one can speak to one long after the funeral. Our aim, however, has been to adhere strictly to reporting on what we saw, what we experienced with our bodies while doing fieldwork, and what we were told by the people we lived with, in their language or the *lingua franca* of the region. We are aware that the technical interventions we describe had deeper cosmological and affective implications, but we refrain from imputing intentionality into people, and the procedures they engage in, when we do not and cannot actually know them. While we cannot answer every question that ethnographic writing raises, we hope to convey a sense of the complexity we encountered.

The techniques, skills and habits that we describe involve not only the individual. Rather, they can be seen as having preventive medical and therapeutic effects because they manage to implicate the group and tie it together, sometimes very concretely, with more or less colourful threads. One could say these practices 'symbolically' link individuals to one another, but our focus is on the materials used and the techniques. This makes the tying together to a tactile technology with a practical purpose, which, because it is generally enacted

12 Remme, this volume.

simultaneously alongside other techniques, results in multi-sensorial effects. It thereby transforms the study of social life into one of 'physical' experience. Several of the seemingly mundane practices seem to enact a convergence, condensation or concentration of soul substances. Such techniques should not be reduced to a short-sighted mechanistic instrumentality for effecting immediate returns. Rather, these practices may pertain to lasting forms of sharing and exchange, relatedness and kinship. We discuss here techniques that can effect such convergence of soul substances in respect of the themes of personhood, emotion and well-being, as addressed in medical anthropology when it dovetails with social anthropology, ethnomusicology and the study of material culture.[13]

Medical anthropology not only provides a critical comment on hospital medicine and futuristic techno-science, but also engages with themes discussed in the anthropology of religion, architecture, history and archaeology. By situating itself at the intersections of social and biological, cultural and evolutionary, political and ecological anthropology, it can throw new light on old anthropological themes – like animism, magic or art – without making use of those terms.[14] As an intrinsically diverse field, it invites thinking outside the box and collaboration across disciplinary boundaries.

As already noted, medical anthropologists have a long history of engaging with 'the problem of belief',[15] and hence must acquire good linguistic skills. However, even a fluent speaker will have difficulties to relate to the domain of souls, spirits, ancestors, ghosts and other numinous beings, without imputing what they know from their own upbringing into it. Paying attention to minute detail in skilled practice may counteract such bias. The ethnographic accounts in this Special Section focus on techniques that treat spiritual beings as material things/forces, and they note that those often are made to converge in order to enhance life. Thus, Isabell Herrmans discusses, *inter alia*, techniques of the Luangan Dayaks in Kalimantan, Borneo, intended to strengthen *juus* life force, such as growing a person's plant counterpart, *samat*, in 'flower groves', where plants are cultivated in clumps; Hsu, Huber and Weckerle focus on 'hearth-oriented' kinship practices among the Shuhi of Southwest China for containing life substances in house and hamlet; Junko Iida who worked among the Khon Mueang in northern Thailand stresses that skilled practice, and not words alone, effect that *khwan* spirits are tied to or released from a person; and Jon Henrik Ziegler Remme discusses tactile, olfactory and auditory procedures that on the one hand solidified and on the other re-distributed *lennawa* life force among the Ifugao on the Philippines.

13 Roseman 1991; Desjarlais 1992; see also Herrmans 2015.

14 e. g., Potter et al. 2015.

15 Good 1994: 1–24.

Techniques of handling soul substances in daily life and culinary technology

The ethnographic research presented here was undertaken among people who boil rice as their staple. To what extent might the ritual practices of handling soul substances have been instilled by this daily endorsed culinary technology? Perhaps, food preparatory techniques like boiling rice may engender particular bodily dispositions towards nutritious and precious life-enhancing substances? The disposition of effecting a convergence of soul substances in daily ritual practice, and containing them in hamlets, houses, bodies and pots, may be related to, if not derived from, the disposition one develops when boiling rice.

Our project elaborates on recent anthropological undertakings to enrich an archaeologically established opposition between two supra-regional complexes of rice-boiling versus wheat-grinding food technologies by discussing those in view of select cultural and religious practices.[16] Archaeologists had long noted that in East Asia people typically boil the staple into ghees and porridges, while in the Middle East, Europe and northern Africa, they grind grain into a flour that they make to a dough and bake. In a similar vein, meat in East Asia, Southeast Asia and, more generally, in the entire region of the Asia-Pacific, is typically stewed, while in Europe, the Middle East and many parts of Africa prestige meat is roasted, ideally as a large chunk on an open fire. While the porridges and stews in the regions of the Asia-Pacific are typically contained in a pot, and are drunk and slurped, the breads and roast meats in Europe and Africa are solid pieces that can be held in one's hand. The nurturing substance is thus either kept in a pot or held as a chunky piece, and ingested through either sucking and drinking or biting and masticating. These skillful practices vis-a-vis food preparation and eating, Dorian Fuller and Mike Rowlands argue, are not without implications for peoples' disposition towards the spiritual world.

> There is overwhelming ethnographic and ethnohistorical evidence for a straightforward contrast between a nexus in East Asia between sticky rice, ancestors that are drawn close by food offerings, food shared out within familial groups, and another nexus in western Asia to north India – of sacrifice to remoter deities in which roasting and baking of foods separate odours/smoke that constitute offerings from the material substances of meat, bread, *etc*., that are consumed by the devotees, who are themselves drawn from across a community.[17]

16 e.g. Fuller/Rowlands 2011.

17 Fuller/Rowlands 2011: 53.

The way in which people handle soul substances may be particularly telling. When fermenting or boiling nutritious substances like rice in water, vapours are prone to dissipate, instilling in people the attitude to either tie a lid with specific knots[18] to the pot or simmer the grains-in-water over a small fire into porridge. Archaeologists consider peoples' predilection for boiling rice and, in particular, glutinous rice into a sticky paste to have originated in an earlier habit of boiling nuts. According to Yasuda,[19] hunters and gatherers who dwelled in the forests of East Asia started making pottery well before the agricultural revolution had occurred, already in *ca*. 19,500–17,000 BP, or *ca*. 18,000–14,000 BP, where by contrast in West Asia the earliest pottery dated to 14,500 BP. This gave rise to the idea that, "perhaps clay pots were used for boiling nuts such as acorn, chestnut, edible wild grass and meat of wild animals [and fish from the sea]."[20] Combined with other archaeological research that, several millennia later after the agricultural revolution, glutinous rice varieties occur only in East and Southeast Asia,[21] it led to the formulation of a hypothesis that cultural preferences shaped biological speciation processes. Specifically, the culturally instilled judgement of taste[22] among hunter-gatherers of East Asia, i. e. the predilection for the sticky and sweet glutinous sap of nuts, is considered to have become the selecting factor among the agriculturalists of East and Southeast Asia to favour the genetics of glutinous rice varieties. This counters the general assumption that 'nature' produces bodies and substances, and 'culture' imbues them with meaning. Rather, these culture-makes-nature processes continue to be implicated in contemporary practice, not least, as documented in what follows, through the continued cooking and offering of sticky rice to deities.

The research presented in this section thus contributes to an intellectual undertaking that links practices of a culinary technology initiated by hunter-gatherers to contemporary problems conventionally discussed in the anthropology of kinship and religion, and more recently in the context of a 'cosmo-economics' regarding the channelling of luck, blessings and good fortune.[23] This gives the observed habitus recorded on the following pages a very long time span of turning 'history into nature', and it suggests that the contemporary gods' sweet tooth would go as far back as to the stone-age. Furthermore, our framework explodes the usual ethnographic focus on the specifically local. Instead, we interpret local practices with a

18 e. g., Remme, this volume.
19 Yasuda 2002.
20 Yasuda 2002: 129–130.
21 e. g., Sakamoto 1996; Fuller/Rowlands 2011: 49.
22 Bourdieu 1984 [1979].
23 Empson 2011; Da Col 2012.

view to an anthropology that takes supra-regional complexes as framework for anthropological analysis. Finally, rather than contrasting hill 'tribes' to lowland 'civilisations', this project underlines continuities between the peoples we lived with to the stratified societies of China and Japan as exemplified in daily practice, common aesthetics and basic morals.

Centripetal orientations

Our focus is on skilled practice, gestures, techniques and bodily dispositions observed in everyday life activities and ritual, rather than on the verbalised symbolism of substances such as that of rice, semen and bone,[24] which may not always be a given anyway.[25] Incidentally, these daily practices do occasionally point to (muted?) ideologies other than the verbalised dominant ones. Regardless, being interested in attitudes, movements and orientations, we note a certain resonance with the 'centrist' orientations that Shelly Errington[26] observed in western insular South East Asia. Those centrist tendencies pertained, among others, to the aim to achieve a confluence in social relations: The process by which two become one is *si-temmack-temmack*' [i.e. to mutually get drenched; *si* 'reciprocal', *temmack* 'to drink']; the aesthetics in house architecture: 'concentric circles image hierarchy, as much centrist as vertical'; and affinal ambitions to marry 'in' and 'up'. However, where Errington limited these centripetal tendencies geographically (to the 'centrist archipelago', which included Borneo and the Philippines, but not Thailand and Southwest China) and demographically (to the lowlands, but not to the hills), this Special Section works with both a more inclusive and more general understanding of centripetal orientations within the realm of rice-boiling peoples found across East and South East Asia.

Our discussion foregrounds practices among the Luangan Dayaks, Shuhi, Ifugao and northern Thai to contain vitality-enhancing substances of a place within that place. These look like 'centrist' tendencies, of which Sillander noted, in his discussion of the *longan* house altar among the Bentian people of Borneo, that they existed also among hill tribes. Bentian rituals fortified 'endogenous potency' and made efforts to increase its 'concentration' in ways which could be called 'centrist', he argued. This potency was sometimes seen as emanating directly from ancestral and autochthonous spirits deemed 'the original, generative forces of the world'; and sometimes it was thought to be coaxed into ritual

24 Thompson 1988: 92–95.
25 Seaman 1992.
26 Errington 1980: 59, 83, 222.

presence by the use of objects best comprehended as a 'means of *acquiring* well-being' rather than being '*sources* of well-being' themselves.[27]

In Mongolia, among the Buryats living on the border between Russia and China, Empson[28] also differentiated between soul substances or life forces, on the one hand, and other more circumstantial situations or activities, on the other, thought to enhance well-being and 'bounty' (*elbeg-delbeg*) rather than being its material source. She spoke of harnessing fortune, blessings, luck (*hishig*). Inconspicuous actions, such as cutting off some tail hair of a cow shortly before selling it off and making sure that some saliva of its muzzle remains sticking to the inside of one's coat, had a ritual quality that heightened her attention. In her analysis, fortune had to be 'contained', but should not excessively be accumulated and kept in circulation.

'Centrist' tendencies can also be found in the moral aesthetics of Chinese philosophy and medicine. The phrase from the *Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon* (*Huangdi nei jing Su wen* 黃帝內經 素問): 'If you conserve essences and spirits within, where from can afflictions assault you' (*jing shen nei shou, bing an cong lai* 精神內守 病安從來)?, resonates with the philosophy of the Mencius: 'to become full and replete is called beautiful' (*chong shi zhi wei mei* 充實之謂美).[29] Both the 'essences and spirits' and the 'virtue' that is implied in the Mencius are here comprehended as soul substances, and their preservation and fullness is said to enhance vitality and beauty.

'Wrapping' among the Japanese might be interpreted as another 'centrist' body technique for containing the precious within. However, the wrapping of the wrapping, and its wrapping and rewrapping, has an ambiguity about it that seems to play on another theme, namely the enfolding of the separated into the whole. The graph 包,[30] in Chinese pronounced *bao*, means 'to embrace', and connotes 'reciprocity and balanced exchange'.[31] In line with this logic of mutual embrace, reciprocity and balanced exchange, luck bringing *engimono* charms are indeed constantly on the move through the different spaces of a house, and rice scoops

27 Sillander 2012: 159; 160.

28 Empson 2011, 2012.

29 These sayings were communicated to me by Ouyang Xiaoyi in December 2016, a high school graduate of traditional Chinese education, where students learn how to memorise the Chinese classics. Their bibliographical references are: *Huangdi nei jing Su wen*, section 1, (Ren 1986: 8); *Mencius*, Book 7, Part B (final chapter) 孟子, 盡心下 (Lau 1970: 199, paragraph 25).

30 Hendry 1995: 24–25 emphasizes that the graph connotes enclosure and containment in a vessel (the womb).

31 Thompson 1988: 97.

have a gapingly wide open mouth.[32] 'Centrist' and 'exchange' logics may accordingly be instantiated in a single body technique, that of wrapping the wrapping.

Likewise, in China, the *Mencius* may have advocated people to become replete with virtue – where *shi* 實 refers to a ripe, mature, sweet fruit – but separating such goodness and bounty from its surroundings was and remains morally suspect. The Mohists of Chinese antiquity, once revered by missionaries for the concepts of universal love and the weaponry of defence they developed, were met with ambivalence in the Chinese imagination: *Mo shou cheng gui* 墨守成規: 'The Mohists for preserving [the city] made use of a measuring compass [to build a wall around it]'[33] is a saying with negative overtones and is used to call someone overly dogmatic.

Bounty and plenty is welcome but just like water in a pot or sounds in a longhouse, its efficaciousness increases through its capacity to flow. *Qi, juus, mana, lennawa* must remain in circulation and be shared, even if this happens in heterogeneous ways. As noted for the Gerai longhouse: 'Good walls make bad neighbours'.[34] Rattan walls are characteristically porous, making the darkness inside the longhouse to a dimly shimmering one. 'Voices flow in a longhouse', Christine Helliwell notes, 'in most extraordinary fashion':

> Moving up and down its length in seeming monologue, they [the voices] are in fact in continual dialogue with listeners who are always unseen, but are always present. As such they create, more than does any other facet of longhouse life, a sense of community. Through the sounds of their voices, neighbours two, three, four or five apartments apart are tied to each other's world, into each other's company, as intimately as if they were in the same room.[35]

During the first two months of living in a longhouse, Helliwell could not understand why her hostess was constantly engaged in talk: 'She would give long descriptions of things that had happened to her during the day, of work she had to do, of the state of her feelings, and so on, all the while standing or working alone in her longhouse apartment.'[36] Relevant for this section is that what was shared in the Gerai longhouse is a sort of soul substance, quite tangibly, as the self extends itself across the space, taking on, as it is heard, so many different shades of meaning. Ever present and comforting, it can touch and meld with another self in diverse ways.

Apart from the above multi-facetted ways in which soul substances are understood to cause social beings to coalesce, the authors in this section also describe

32 Daniels 2003.
33 The *verbatim* translation of the 'saying' (*chengyu* 成語) is contested.
34 Helliwell 1993.
35 Helliwell 1993: 51.
36 Helliwell 1993: 51.

ritual practices of tying each other together by means of threads: Herrmans discusses how, after having been exposed to the 'centrifugal forces that life in general might involve', people are tied together while making offerings to the spirits to reassert social unity (see her Figure 1). Hsu, Huber and Weckerle comment on how, during an annual ceremony for reaffirming cattle fecundity, villagers tie colourful woollen threads from ancestral stone seats to an altar. Ziegler Remme describes instances of making specific *pudung* knots to seal field and village borders after rice planting is finished (see his Figure 3); and Iida describes an exorcist ritual where threads are visibly cut and spirits of one's parents in former life are expelled. Different entities, animals, stones, plants and human beings, each concrete and fairly clearly bounded, are made to converge by the mechanics of tying and knotting. This tying together of chunky beings and things seems quite different from the melding of the above soul substances such as the voices in the Gerai long house, the clumps of *juus* among the Luangan Dayak or the solidified *lennawa-odol* relation among the Ifugao. In some village rituals the coloured threads come out of a pole or a tree, which is rotated, such that centripetally people are drawn 'in' and 'up' in a spiral movement.[37] It would appear as though chunky bodies and things were wrapped into the flows of mutual interdependency, thereby effecting the convergence of soul substances foregrounded in this Special Section. Clearly, techniques and technologies travel, and as they are appropriated in different surroundings with materials offering other forms of resistance, they are transformed. Each of the ethnographies below concerns socialities that enact a variety of different techniques that, with certainty, have been appropriated from a variety of provenances over time.

Admittedly, the concept of 'soul substances' encompasses almost everything from the 'supernatural' spirits of the dead to 'natural' life substances like blood, semen, water or fire, and adds to those the flows of voice. We refer to them here as 'soul substances' because people treated them as life-enhancing and sociality-making substances, much like the nutritious staple daily prepared in kitchen pots. Effecting a convergence of soul substances requires certain attitudes and dispositions, and among them may belong forms of attentiveness and skill such as boiling rice in a watery fluid to produce, alongside the ever-elusive vapours, a sticky paste. This does not mean that we are vague or muddled about their situation-specific appearance, activities and effective remit. Our focus is not so much on the thing itself, and how it is called, as on the procedures into which it has been implicated: we are interested in processes and practices. Although we do not state it explicitly in each

37 Schiesser, forthcoming.

contribution, the texts allow for an interpretation of linking the age-old culinary technology of rice-boiling to the ways in which people today handle 'soul substances' in ritual and daily practice.

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